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Farm Bill Details Unveiled and USDA Says Bill Not Acceptable

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Matt Kaye



Top farm bill lawmakers unveiled details of their house-senate deal Thursday but the Bush administration quickly rejected it. The 300-billion dollar bill cuts 3.5 billion in producer safety net programs alone, to help boost feeding, conservation, energy and specialty crop programs. And it sets a hard limit of 750-thousand in farm income to receive direct payments, 500-thousand in non-farm income, plus limits on conservation payments.

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Top Senate Ag Republican Saxby Chambliss of Georgia said, "We did make real reforms in all of the commodity title, but no more significant reforms than in the payment limit provisions. We moved as far as we could toward the administration on their request."

The bill also relies on customs user fees to boost funding in key areas, instead of tax increases. It also replaced an Indiana-only farm flex acre pilot for canning tomatoes with a 7-state program that gives Indiana 9-thousand to switch to non-program crops.

But there was not enough reform for the White House. USDA Secretary Ed Schafer right after the farm bill press conference said, "For a year-and-a-half, the administration's been consistently clear that Congress needs to move forward with a good farm bill, that the President can sign. They have failed to do so. This legislation lacks meaningful farm program reform, and expands the size and scope of government."

Top House Ag Republican Bob Goodlatte argued the bill would help boost US food production and deal with world hunger, but he would not commit to actively sell the bill to other house republicans to win a veto-proof margin. "My indication of support would indicate that I'm favorably disposed toward it, but I think every member needs to determine for themselves, and I think if they do, it'll have a very strong vote."

Though House Ag Chair Collin Peterson acknowledges the challenge ahead, he hopes the President can still sign it and that there's some way the bill makes it into law. However late Thursday Schafer added, "I have visited face to face with our President and he was direct and plain. The President will veto this bill."

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